

‘Joseph Conrad’s Magic Circles’

Douglas Kerr

‘It is safe to say,’ Conrad ventured in the essay ‘Geography and Some Explorers’, ‘that for the majority of mankind the superiority of geography over geometry lies in the appeal of its figures.’¹ The geography of Joseph Conrad’s *Victory* (1915) centres upon a round island, and the book’s form too describes a kind of circle. It starts where it finished. ‘The last word of this novel’ are the first words of the author’s Note to the First Edition, the first words you read after the first word of the novel, the title, which as the note explains was the last word to be written. (The actual last word of the novel will be the word *nothing*.) The beginning of the book then sounds the first note of circularity. A circle is a plane figure bounded by a single line everywhere equidistant from its centre. It is a closed figure, and the narrative implications of that defining equidistance of the circumference are that motion along the rim of the circle will always in the end return to its starting point; the end will always be the beginning. It’s not that you don’t get anywhere, but that you don’t get anywhere in the end.

The beginning of the story introduces Axel Heyst and our first datum about him is that he was prevented from going away. Heyst dwells on his little circular island, ‘perched on it immovably’, and surrounded ‘by a tepid, shallow sea; a passionless offshoot of the great waters which embrace the continents of the globe’ (p. 57).² The figure of enclosure – and that of embrace – will both turn out to be important here, but for the moment we need only note that Heyst’s encirclement on his island is a condition shared on a greater scale by the continents themselves, which are all islands even though their inhabitants may not be daily aware of this; isolation, the island condition, is the condition of all human existence. Heyst, meanwhile, continues to be placed in terms of surroundings. ‘On the nights of full moon the silence around Samburan – the “Round Island” of the charts – was dazzling’ (p. 58), a sentence in which the roundness of the moon rhymes with the roundness of the island surrounded by both the sea and the silence (later the moon also rhymes jocularly with the baldness Heyst shares with Mr Kurtz). The

opening pages of *Victory* stake out the territory like a page of Stevie's drawing, with its coruscating whirl of concentric and eccentric circles (*The Secret Agent*, p.40).³

However, Heyst is not exactly a Prospero imprisoned on his round island. He could leave it if he wanted, and indeed he has done a good deal of travelling about the region, on the 'rather aimless wanderings' about which it is thought he has written pages and pages to his friends back in Europe. But Heyst's early travels have been a circulating drift rather than a purposive itinerary. 'He was not a traveller. A traveller arrives and departs, goes on somewhere. Heyst did not depart.' (p. 59). Nor does he arrive, really. When he turns up in Delli at exactly the right moment to save Morrison, Morrison wonders if he has been sent by some supernatural agency, but Heyst firmly disclaims this: 'I just happened along,' he says (p. 67). No purposive linearity is available to Heyst. Beyond the circle of his own isolation – for after Morrison's death 'not a single soul belonging to him lived anywhere on earth' (p. 110), and beyond the settlement surrounded by jungle on the round island surrounded by the silent ocean – is a wider circle that contains him, a magic circle of fascination that has earned him one of his nicknames, Enchanted Heyst.

Roughly speaking, a circle with a radius of eight hundred miles drawn round a point in North Borneo was in Heyst's case a magic circle. It just touched Manila, and he had been seen there. It just touched Saigon, and he was likewise seen there once. Perhaps these were his attempts to break out. If so, they were failures. The enchantment must have been an unbreakable one (p. 60).

Within this wide circle Heyst has 'moonied about' (p. 60) – another circulation – pursuing an 'unattached, floating existence' (p. 68), for fifteen years, and we are to learn that the decision to drift, 'to drift altogether and literally, body and soul' (p. 130), has been an existential choice, or anti-existential choice, adopted by the son of a father whose stern ascetic nihilism has taught him that the best strategy for life is apostasy, standing aside.⁴ If effort is futile and attachment always disappointing, the young Heyst commits himself to self-sufficiency and detachment, not moving but moving around. His enchanted circle becomes his 'defence against life' (p. 130), a sanctuary against disappointment. If you expect nothing, nothing is disappointing. And if nothing happens, if you opt out of

narrative, nothing can go wrong. Heyst's defence against life, his magic circle, is also a kind of death.

This is not the whole story of course, and indeed the magic circle is supposed to be a denial of the possibility of story. But Heyst does indeed break out of his magic circle, though he does so in a particularly unpurposive, random manner. His unplanned association with Morrison – forced on him by Morrison's sense of his obligation to Heyst after the latter has helped him – brings him into partnership and involvement with Morrison's affairs, and Heyst finds himself working for the Tropical Belt Coal Company. His knowledge of the region is enlisted in the service of progress and modernity, and Heyst is galvanised, his former drifting now replaced by a sudden display of purposeful energy and bustling movement, 'rushing all over the Archipelago, jumping in and out of local mail-packets as if they had been tram-cars, here, there, and everywhere' (p. 74). The circle man has become an emissary of change and he starts to express himself in a language of progressive linearity, for he talks of 'a great stride forward for these regions' (p. 59). Development means change, a disruption of rhythms of repetition, the production of novelty and of narrative, what George Eliot had called 'the onward tendency of human things' (*The Mill on the Floss*, p. 363).⁵ Heyst's sudden conversion to historicism alarms 'everybody in the islands' (p. 73), which means the mostly European traders and sailors who speak as 'we' in the story, because coal means steamers, and steamers will mean the end of a settled way of life. Heyst is ready literally to redraw the map of the region, and Samburan, formerly enclosed in a magic circle in which nothing could happen, is now refigured as a hub, a centre of progress.

From the first he had selected Samburan, or Round Island, for the central station. Some copies of the prospectus issued in Europe, having found their way out East, were passed from hand to hand. We greatly admired the map which accompanied them for the edification of the shareholders. On it Samburan was represented as the central spot of the Eastern Hemisphere with its name engraved in enormous capitals. Heavy lines radiated from it in all directions through the tropics, figuring a mysterious and effective star – lines of influence or lines of distance, or something of that sort. Company promoters have an imagination of their own (p. 73).

To the traders who see their livelihood threatened, Heyst is now the Enemy, the potential destroyer of their little industry. ‘That’s what they call development,’ these people grumble (p. 73), and they are right, for a coalmining company, capitalised in London and spreading its network of mines and coaling stations across the East Indies, could be just the transforming agent that might set the region on the ambiguous but irreversible path to modernity. In *Nostromo* (1904) Conrad had written a whole novel about the power of a silver mine to make history. But Heyst’s unexpected allegiance to change, modernity and the straight and upwardly inclined lines of progress, is soon to collapse. The capital evaporates, the company goes into liquidation, and Heyst is returned to the inertia from which he was uncharacteristically roused. Nothing changes in fact, it was vanity to suppose that it would, and the paralysing enchantment of the islands is not broken. What appeared to be a straight line of development was only in fact another circle. Heyst settles for good, it seems, on his round island, undisturbed except for occasional visits by Captain Davidson whose own circular itinerary, on his regular sixteen-hundred-mile round trips, takes him close to Samburan. Life goes on like clockwork, or like one of those vigorous but completely pointless machines Conrad liked to imagine had been left in charge of the universe.⁶ The people ‘out there’ (p. 57) continue with the daily round of trade, and the circulation of gossip that constitutes their intellectual life.⁷ Wang, Heyst’s Chinese servant, cultivates his garden, but observes the spirit of Samburan and his master by building ‘a high and very close fence round his patch’ (p. 199). Axel Heyst himself, his father’s convictions about the vanity of human enterprise apparently confirmed, is now Heyst the hermit, willingly confined to the small circle of his island and the smaller round of his skull. On Samburan Heyst reads in the circle of lamplight, and Wang gardens on his patch encircled by a fence; the seasons come round, night falls, the moon rises. The system is stable. Nothing is expected.

Thus far, we might say that circles in *Victory* give us what Greimas would recognise as a thematic homology in this novel.⁸ Circulation is repetitive and predictable; it has no issue and in the end always returns upon itself. Encirclement is a kind of paralysis, a denial of narrative and change, though it may also be a sanctuary and an escape. Natural time is circular, the succession of nights and days and of seasons. But historical time is linear. Linearity implies movement from one thing to another, change

(including the economic or political possibility of change of ownership), the possibility or promise of development and progress, but also of violence, instability and loss. For Conrad and his contemporaries, whatever their political persuasions, history of the linear kind – what we might call modernity – was something made in the West, the product of economic strength and enterprise, industrial technology, the spread of empires and trade. The contrast between western lines and eastern circles is neatly encapsulated in the exclamation from Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall', 'Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay' (l. 184). The speaker in Tennyson's poem assumes that fifty years of Europe means fifty years of eventful progress, since the world itself is spinning forever 'down the ringing grooves of change' (l. 182), which is what a railway train can do on a straight stretch of track, and Europe is presumed to be the engine (or perhaps the engine-driver). Similarly, Axel Heyst in his brief spell as the incarnation of progress and the Tropical Belt Coal Company saw himself as describing a whole network of purposive straight lines across the map of the eastern seas, and assisting the region in its great stride towards modernity. His temporary faith in the straight line was economic but also philosophical and ideological, as the sardonic narrator observes. 'What he seemed mostly concerned for was the "stride forward", as he expressed it, in the general organization of the universe, apparently' (p. 59). But the line of progress turned out after all to be part of another circle (as Heyst might have intuited if he had paid attention to the clue in the company's name). It is always unsafe to put your trust in straight lines if you are a Conrad character, for what in Conrad looks like a straight line almost invariably turns out to be a circle or leads to a circle or turns into a circle in the end.⁹ The refusal of most of his narratives to be straightforward, in a temporal or thematic sense, may be taken as his formal gesture of dissent from linearity. Conrad must be one of the most anti-teleological writers in the history of literature, and in his fiction the figure of the circle is often the signature of this scepticism about the ability of anyone to get anywhere in the end.

The Secret Agent (1907) is probably the most obvious place to see this at work, for there Conrad assembles a group of dedicated teleologists in the form of the political activists who frequent Verloc's parlour, and immediately encircles them in their own futility. Michaelis is an example who may stand for the rest, for he declares his faith in the inevitability of revolution, seeing indeed 'the end of all private property coming along

logically, unavoidably,' (p. 38) and yet just making this ringing declaration so exhausts him that he becomes breathless and incapable, his own body contradicting his faith in linearity since he is himself 'round like a tub' (p. 37). The longer the anarchists talk about revolutionary change, the more they guarantee that it will not happen. Meanwhile Verloc's brother-in-law, the half-witted Stevie, sits in the next-door room patiently doodling his circles in the margins of their discourse.

A more singular example of the deceptiveness of straight lines occurs early in *Lord Jim* (1900), in the sumptuous passage that describes Jim's night watch on the *Patna* as she steams across the Indian Ocean, her own progress described by the straight line on the chart in the wheel-house with the instruments of positivist western linearity, dividers and rulers and a pencil sharpened to a point. The map corresponds to Jim's idea of the romantic career that stretches before him, and at such times his dreams of his own imaginary achievements, in all their 'gorgeous virility', pass before him 'with an heroic tread' (p. 58).¹⁰ Unfortunately the map corresponds not at all to the reality of the heartbreaking territory he is about to enter. For the next time we see him he is giving his evidence at the enquiry, 'and while his utterance was deliberate, his mind positively flew round and round the serried circle of facts' of his disgrace, like a creature imprisoned within an enclosure of high stakes, and unable to escape (p. 65). The desperate circumlocutions of his later confession to Marlow painfully re-enact the disgraceful action he cannot quite bring himself to narrate. His reputation lost, he moves on and tries in vain to break out of the enclosing ring of his own scandal, which always ripples outward to engulf him. But he is in a story structured as a series of repetitions, as J. Hillis Miller has demonstrated,¹¹ and even in remote Patusan, a seemingly perfect place for a new life of redemptive adventure, Jim is to find the same pattern of opportunity and betrayal will come round again.

Captain Whalley, in 'The End of the Tether', is a *bona fide* straight-line man, in his prime a navigator and explorer 'who had made famous passages, had been the pioneer of new routes and new trades,' and inscribed his name literally on the Admiralty charts and the *General Directory* (p. 45),¹² where a more direct sea route he discovered is recommended as reducing the average time of a passage by eleven days. He is a straight man in the moral sense too, a completely reliable employee and scrupulous professional

who has never consented to a shady transaction. Even in reduced circumstances he is still ‘always straight’ (p. 131), and impresses the normally cynical Mr Van Wyck with his firm faith in manifest progress – human progress in knowledge of truth, in decency, in justice, in order and in honesty, as well as the cultural and material progress of the East Indies themselves, under the benign influence of the West. But the captain’s heroic past has evaporated as completely as Jim’s romantic dreams, his pioneering oceangoing under sail now reduced to the ‘monotonous huckster’s round, up and down the Straits,’ (p. 44) of the *Sofala*, little more than a tramp steamer going about its repetitive business. Having lost his savings in a bank collapse, the old captain needs to keep working in order to provide for his daughter, and this causes him to relinquish another aspect of his straightness. While not exactly bent, he is deceiving his owners by continuing to captain the *Sofala* while concealing the fact that he is going blind. His wide horizons contract not only to the miserable circuit of the *Sofala*, but more tragically to the ever-narrowing circumference of the visible, and finally to the engulfing vortex in which he perishes, ‘sucked down by the whirlpool of a sinking ship’ when he goes down with the sabotaged *Sofala* (p. 168).

The vortex that swallows the erstwhile explorer is violent and tragic, whereas the endless discussions of Verloc’s associates were futile and farcical; but both figures, like Conrad’s other circles, speak to an ironic curtailment of any faith in improvement, whether progressive or revolutionary. Heyst’s voluntary self-encirclement seems a rational acknowledgement of the conditions of existence in a Conradian universe in whatever continent – or would seem so, if Heyst’s circle were as magically inviolable as he supposes. Other examples could multiply.¹³ But before returning to *Victory*, I will offer one more instance of a location with a story to tell about circles, this time in Africa.

An outpost is a defended position in advance of an army’s march; at the site of an outpost, a line ends in a circle. In ‘An Outpost of Progress’, Kayerts and Carlier in their trading station beside the great African river are not just agents of progress but its *avant-garde*, the advance party of the Great Trading Company, whose name is changed at the end of the story to the Great Civilizing Company, in deference to the truth universally acknowledged that civilization follows trade. Kayerts and Carlier are consistently described in the tale as agents; that is, it is their job to do something, to further trade, and

with it civilization, for their employer. The company director makes a speech to them about the great opportunities of this posting, and sails off downriver, leaving them to it, but privately sceptical about their abilities to make anything happen. 'I bet nothing will be done! They won't know how to begin' (p. 85).¹⁴ He is right. These are not narrative-makers; they prefer to spend their time reading the old novels left by their predecessor, and having endless boring conversations about the characters. 'Together they did nothing, absolutely nothing, and enjoyed the sense of idleness for which they were paid' (p. 88).

For these pioneers of trade and progress are in fact circle men too (which is why they do not know where or how a beginning should be made). They are the product of their European environment, having grown up in and indeed been made possible by the circumambience of the urban crowd, in a society whose high organization has supplied them with their identity, their opinions, their emotions and principles. Removed from that element with its insulating predictability, they are incapable of doing anything at all. The great river that flows past the trading post is the instrument and symbol of history, the line of travel, trade and change (including the European penetration into Africa), of origins and destinations; yet to their eyes the river has no teleology, seeming 'to come from nowhere and to flow nowhither' (p. 87), a geometrical solecism.¹⁵ Even the river seems to be under the hypnotic spell that suspends the agents in inactivity and immobility. Inert and virtually prostrate in the insignificant cleared spot of the trading post in the centre of Africa, Kayerts and Carlier are nonetheless encouraged by their own outstanding stupidity and sloth to see themselves as part of the grand narrative of European global triumph, expounded, in the high-flown language of an old newspaper they find, as *Our Colonial Expansion*. They enjoy thinking of themselves as makers of history, the founding fathers of some future metropolis – Kayertsville perhaps – with quays, warehouses, barracks and (says Carlier, his invention already flagging) billiard-rooms (p. 90).

The extraordinary contempt in which Conrad holds his two futile pioneers does not mean that he has any more respect for their director or the Company they serve. That Kayerts and Carlier are agents without agency, useless at their jobs, does not mean that the institution that employs them is in the least admirable. The two agents are not despised for their inability to blaze a further trail for the cause of trade and civilization,

but for their smug belief that the world owes them a living merely because of who they are – and later, after the raid of the Loanda bandits in complicity with Price-Makola, for their spineless readiness to profit from the enslavement and murder of human beings for whom they are responsible. But in the slow collapse that follows, there is a strange metamorphosis in their relation with their surroundings. They are oppressed with a feeling that something from within them has gone, ‘something that worked for their safety, and had kept the wilderness from interfering with their hearts;’ the great silence of the surrounding wilderness seems to approach and envelop them (p. 101). Students of ‘Heart of Darkness’ and ‘The Hollow Men’ will recognize the symptoms. As what inner integrity they had implodes, the ambient darkness hems them in, and their surroundings contract around them. The clearing with its trading post has now become the site of a subtle siege, and the circle enclosing Kayerts and Carlier indicates not just paralysis but a claustrophobic territoriality; they cling to their possession in an encroaching moral panic, until a trivial quarrel sets them finally against each other, in rage and fear, and they pursue each other round and round the veranda that encircles their house.

It seems likely that the commonest use of the circle in magic was for protection, and that the boundaries or walls of a settlement in primitive magical societies were often a supernatural as well as a physical barrier against incursion, creating, with the help of apotropaic circling ritual, a field of defensive magical force.¹⁶ Kayerts and Carlier’s circulations certainly have the effect of unravelling the magic circle that has protected them hitherto from both knowledge and hurt. But even in this terminal crisis, the wretched Kayerts collapses into inertia, immobilized by breathlessness but more seriously ‘completely distracted by the sudden perception that the position was without issue’; and even now, although in his panic he shoots Carlier dead, he is unable to do so purposively, and the narrative declines to issue him with a transitive verb – ‘A loud explosion took place between them’ (pp. 105, 106).¹⁷ However, in the vigil that follows, before the arrival of the company’s steamer the next morning, Kayerts in shock breaks out of the bounds of his habitual mediocrity. ‘He sat by the corpse thinking; thinking very actively, thinking very new thoughts. He seemed to have broken loose from himself altogether’ (p. 107). He has become at the last an original, a real pioneer, but the intellectual discovery he makes is that human life is trivial and disgusting, people believe

all sorts of nonsense, there is no difference between being alive and being dead. This line of thought leads him to the circle of futility, from which there is no issue but suicide. In the only purposive action of his life, he hangs himself from the cross that marks the grave of his predecessor. Having coming round to the exact spot where his precursor ended up, Kayerts's corpse sticks out a swollen tongue at the Managing Director who has come back too late to reclaim him for progress and civilization.

The figure of the magic circle is visible in *Victory* (and elsewhere in Conrad) in its two main and partly contradictory functions, those of sanctuary and of futility.

The islands are very quiet. One sees them lying about, clothed in their dark garments of leaves, in a great hush of silver and azure, where the sea without murmurs meets the sky in a ring of magic stillness. A sort of smiling somnolence broods over them; the very voices of their people are soft and subdued, as if afraid to break some protecting spell. Perhaps this was the very spell which had enchanted Heyst in the early days. For him, however, that was broken. He was no longer enchanted, though he was still a captive of the islands. He had no intention to leave them ever. Where could he have gone to, after all these years? Not a single soul belonging to him lived anywhere on earth. Of this fact – not such a remote one, after all – he had only lately become aware; for it is failure that makes a man enter into himself and reckon up his resources (p. 110).

The particular island territoriality Heyst has adopted is an escape from the frustrations and vanities of action in the outside world. In isolation and silence he husbands his integrity, in obedience to his father's advice to believe and desire nothing, to look on and make no sound. The magic circle of Samburan is his retreat from the world, his impenetrable stockade of self-sufficiency. There he feels strong. And yet Heyst also comes to admit to himself that his isolation is a sign of his failure of agency, of his inability to do what a man is expected to do – to take action, to go somewhere, to change the world, to make narrative. He is also soon to discover that disengagement is no prophylactic against the actions of others. He may have cut himself off from the world, but the world is not going to leave him alone; 'I am the world itself,' Mr Jones will tell him, 'come to pay you a visit' (p. 359). In all these respects, the parallel with Jim in *Patusan* is very strong. In both cases of retreat from the business of men and the western

traffic around the globe, to an enclosed, apparently timeless, unworldly and enchanted space, the orientalism of the figure of the circle is manifest enough.

If Heyst had had a copy of Conrad's *Lord Jim* among his books on Samburan, perhaps things might have turned out differently. He might have seen a warning in the irony of Jim's repeated assurances to Marlow that nothing can touch him in his sanctuary in Patusan. Unfortunately, Heyst too is over-confident in the security of his own magic circle. 'Nothing can break in on us here,' he promises Lena, and bodily endorses this reassurance of protection by 'raising her straight out of the chair into a sudden and close embrace' (pp. 233, 234). The promise is a kind of apotropaic spell and the encircling embrace can be seen as its accompanying ritual, but both are immediately shown to be ineffective. Heyst and Lena are surprised to discover that the privacy of this intimate scene has already been invaded, and the Chinese servant Wang is standing there, having 'materialised in the doorway'. Wang has a magic of his own, which is, besides, a genuine oriental one.¹⁸ His inscrutable ability to appear and disappear has already introduced a disconcerting unpredictability into the otherwise frictionless round of daily life on the island. In the end Wang seems empowered to out-enchant any magic at the disposal of Heyst or anyone else, and it is Wang who will end the story in possession of the enchanted island, like Prospero's Ariel. On this occasion he has materialised in the doorway to announce that he has seen a boat approaching the island, the arrival of the boat, with its lethal passengers, coinciding exactly with Heyst's reassurance that the lovers are invulnerable. The boat makes landfall in an 'uncanny' way, for after it has been spotted by Wang it then seems to vanish; Heyst and Wang go out to the end of the jetty and search for it in the empty bay in which nothing whatever is to be seen. A sound from below makes Heyst run and look underneath the jetty, where he sees the boat and its exhausted company – the boat is already behind and beneath him, and the defences of the magic circle have been breached. No wonder this uncanny arrival puts Heyst in mind of 'those myths, current in Polynesia, of amazing strangers, who arrive at an island, gods or demons, bringing good or evil to the innocence of the inhabitants' (p. 237-8).

Heyst has no trouble in recognising all three of them. 'Here they are,' he tells Lena, 'the envoys of the outer world. Here they are before you – evil intelligence, instinctive savagery, arm in arm. The brute force is at the back' (p. 318). The invaders are

adventurers in the debased sense, goaded into action by a rumour that Heyst has amassed a great treasure in gold on Samburan. However gentlemanly his past may have been (he tells Heyst he has been ejected 'from his proper social sphere' for refusing to conform to certain usual conventions), the sinister and restless Mr Jones now spends his time 'coming and going up and down the earth' (p. 309-10), like Satan in the Book of Job. These men have a single-minded desire to infiltrate Heyst's paradise and plunder his sanctuary. Hearing Heyst described as self-possessed, Ricardo declares he would soon let out some of his self-possession through a hole between his ribs (p. 265), and this specific appetite for puncturing and plunder links Jones and his crew with the earlier invasion and excavation of Samburan by the Tropical Belt Coal Company. Both sets of venturers believe Samburan is a treasure island, and Ricardo, who sees Lena as his particular prize, uses the same language when he gloats over her – 'It's you who are my treasure. It's I who found you out where a gentleman had buried you to rot for his accursed pleasure!' (p. 373). Faced with such antagonists, it is vain for Heyst to tell Mr Jones that he has forced open an empty space that contains no material riches: 'You are giving yourself no end of trouble, you and your faithful henchman, to crack an empty nut' (p. 363).¹⁹ All three strangers invade the island with a 'simple, straightforward violence' (p. 290) – masculine penetration, robbery and possession.²⁰ The brutal Ricardo outside Lena's bedroom knows what he wants and goes straight for it.

The self-restraint was at an end: his psychology must have its way. The instinct for the feral spring could no longer be denied. Ravish or kill – it was all one to him, as long as by the act he liberated the suffering soul of savagery repressed for so long. After a quick glance over his shoulder, which hunters of big game tell us no lion or tiger omits before charging home, Ricardo charged, head down, straight at the curtain (p. 287).

This first violent coming together of Ricardo and Lena prefigures their last fatal encounter, but before that comes round there is time to consider further the failure of Heyst's magic circle to protect him as it should. The fact is that the defences of his self-possession had already been breached before Mr Jones and his henchmen arrived at Samburan; they have been breached by Lena. Since his rather awkward association with

Morrison, who is now dead, Heyst has been effectively alone in the world.²¹ Now he has formed a tie indeed with Lena, in a sort of mutual magic – Schomberg at least believes that Lena must have been ‘circumvented’ (p. 132) by some occult craft of Heyst’s, while Heyst is enthralled by the ‘wonderful enchantment’ of her musical voice (p. 222) and the ‘sortilege of their common life’ (p. 216). When something she says causes him to laugh, he explains this in a familiar figure – ‘That’s because, when one’s heart has been broken into in the way you have broken into mine, all sorts of weaknesses are free to enter’ (p. 223) – and he has already warned her, and himself, that when a man forms a tie he is fatally weakened and ‘the germ of corruption has entered his soul’ (p. 215). In a sense there is already a wooden horse inside his citadel. By himself he would have been effectively invulnerable to the invaders because by himself he had nothing to lose; but now Lena is with him, his defences are compromised.

Heyst’s revolver, that emblem of masculine agency, seems to have disappeared; it is actually the resourceful Wang who has made it vanish, prudently stealing the weapon before doing one of his own disappearing tricks. Heyst and Lena seek him out in his hut but find its smoky interior empty. Sensing the danger of this western quarrel, Wang has taken refuge with the indigenous Alfuro people of the island, who have erected a barricade of felled trees – Heyst calls it ‘a barrier against the march of civilization’ (p. 330) – to protect themselves. Through its foliage Heyst and Lena can see protruding the spear-points of the Alfuro, Wang’s apparently disembodied face, and Heyst’s missing revolver. But they are refused sanctuary there. This inner circle of Samburan is oriental *Hinterland*, the eastern interior into which western power cannot reach or even see. Wang and his wife can find refuge there, but it is a circle that remains closed to Heyst. Western discourse about the East is maculated with these blind spots, the geographical, domestic, or psychological spaces of occlusion and resistance that turn aside lines of enquiry or incursion. Heyst in trouble, looking for a safe place to leave Lena, seeks to move deeper into the East, only to reach the limit of his world.

His outer defences breached, and finding no issue within, Heyst seems to be lost, his magic futile. But in this story the figure of the circle has another resource which deploys itself to protect him. Surprising, even unConradian, as it may seem, the circle also

operates here as the signifier of love. The sexual relationship between Heyst and Lena expresses itself only, but frequently, in the figure of an embrace, a bodily gesture which both immobilises and protects, being at the same time a tie – ‘he who forms a tie is lost’ (p. 215) – and a shield. Lena comes to Heyst in the garden of Schomberg’s hotel in Sourabaya and embraces him as a suppliant; he returns her clasp, ‘at first mechanically, and afterward with a growing appreciation of her distressed humanity’ (p. 123), and after his rescue of her, their mutual embracement, now as lovers, continues when they play the half-acknowledged roles of the Adam and Eve of Samburan. When the diabolical Mr Jones slithers into their paradise, Lena is aware that she hampers her lover but she is also determined to shield him.

While [Heyst] put his arm round her waist – not by any means an uncommon thing for him to do – she found a special satisfaction in the feeling of being thus sustained. She abandoned all her weight to that encircling and protecting pressure, while a thrill went through her at the sudden thought that it was she who would have to protect him, to be the defender of a man who was strong enough to lift her bodily, as he was doing even then in his two arms (p. 302).

As the danger gathers around them, Lena enters into what seems to be a trance-like state, as she prepares to take the coming struggle upon herself. She will meet the assault of ‘simple, straightforward violence’ by embracing it, defeating the homicidal Ricardo and his ‘sting of death’ with her charms.

What this amounts to in practice is that she manages to disarm Ricardo. She sits in the brilliantly lit room of the bungalow, dressed in black and under the severe portrait of Heyst’s father, as Ricardo, sprawled on the floor in front of her, declares his desire for her in terms of ‘terrible eulogy and even more awful declarations of love’ (p. 372); as he moves closer to her feet she leans forward over him, and gets her hand on his knife, which she secretes in the folds of her dress. ‘She felt a dampness break out all over her’ (p. 375). It is this extraordinary moment, framed like a picture in the lighted doorway and made more brilliant in the lightning, that Heyst and Mr Jones see as they approach the house. Conrad is careful to give the iconic image from their spectatorial point of view first, before circling back to narrate how Ricardo came there, what they said to each other

and how Lena possessed herself of Ricardo's knife in her determination to save her lover's life.

What is happening here? The answer is a kind of magic. This tableau could be a mother and child group, or a suppliant at the knees of a goddess. It is also a love scene, at least Ricardo thinks it is, its sexuality barely displaced into the burial of the phallic blade in the folds of the dress, so strangely recalling the envelopment of the would-be rapist in the billowing curtain in the earlier scene. What Lena does in her performance of sacrifice and propitiation is to take the murderous Ricardo to herself, first reducing him to a kind of childishness, grovelling at her knee, gasping and sobbing, and then virtually receiving him back into her body, not as a lover – for he has surrendered his masculinity – but as an infant. She brings his life to an end (this is what it will amount to) by returning it to its beginning, to the scene of birth. Even as she cedes all agency to him – 'I'll be anything you like,' she says (p. 376) – she traps and envelops him and conjures from him the source and symbol of his power. She does to Ricardo exactly what Schomberg thought had been done to her, when he said she must have been 'circumvented by some occult exercise of force or craft, by the laying of some subtle trap' (p. 132). The circumvention is an appropriate narrative climax to this circle-haunted tale, and it constitutes Lena's 'victory', the circle which signified sanctuary and futility here achieving a further function in the neutralising of destructive action.

With its casual and gossipy beginning, its desultory wanderings around the map of the region and back and forth in time, *Victory* is for much of its length a slack narrative, but it tightens up towards its climax, its final actions covering a single day on Samburan and closing in with dramatic intensity on the scene of Lena's self-sacrifice, in which she puts a stop to the invaders' designs at the cost of her own life – for Lena and Ricardo are both shot, Mr Jones's incursion collapses and soon all the villains have perished. Indeed the story contracts right down to the stark image of Lena's body itself, the strong magic of her femininity that has defeated the rapacious Ricardo, and the breach in her body's integrity which was the price of her victory over Heyst's enemies. Seeing she is wounded, he tears open the front of her dress, to see 'the little black hole made by Mr Jones's bullet under the swelling breast of a dazzling and as it were sacred whiteness' (p. 379). Exulting in her 'tremendous achievement', she is now ready for the final moves

of their mutual circulation as the lover she has saved is ready 'to lift her up in his firm arms and take her into the sanctuary of his innermost heart – for ever!' (p. 381). The intensely melodramatic, operatic focus of *Victory* closes at the end on the fate of the violated but victorious body of the woman, the human figure in the centre of the magic circle.

'Victory' is not the last word of *Victory*. The thematic pattern traced here is one in which a line can inscribe purpose, agency, and progress, but leads all too often to violence and destruction, as the progressive path of enlightenment allegorised in Mr Kurtz's painting led in fact to slavery and murder in the heart of darkness, while his pioneering journey upriver came to a dead end in the Inner Station. Effort leads to its own waste and failure, a world of purposeless circulation envisaged by the elder Heyst, or by the young Stevie, artist of circles. But the circle may be redeemed as the figure for sanctuary, indeed for love in the only way Conrad seems ready to allow it, as a strong and self-sacrificing desire to protect another. It is under the sign of this circle that Lena has her victory. And yet in the end it is a hollow victory; in a few hours not only she and the three invaders but Heyst too will be dead, his charred remains identified in the embers of the bungalow he has set alight, and Lena's saving gesture is swallowed up in a wider process of futility. Conrad's last great novel is a story about entropy. Its first chapter begins with coal and its last chapter ends with ashes. In the end, death is the unappealing figure that encircles all human effort, and from this circle no magic can help us escape, it is safe to say.

University of Hong Kong

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Last Essays* (1926), p. 1.

² Page references to *Victory* are to the Penguin edition, edited by Robert Hampson (Harmondsworth, 1989).

³ Page references to *The Secret Agent* are to the Cambridge edition, edited by Bruce Harkness and S. W. Reid (Cambridge, 1990).

⁴ Conrad himself is sometimes discussed as if his views were identical with those of Heyst père. 'The special place of Joseph Conrad in English literature lies in the fact that in him the nihilism covertly dominant in modern culture is brought to the surface and shown for what it is.' J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), p. 5. The appositeness of Axel Heyst's description of the portrait of his father as 'the man with the quill pen in his hand' who is 'responsible for [his] existence' (*Victory*, p. 212) is discussed by Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan in *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (Oxford, 1991), p. 184-5.

⁵ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* [1860] (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 363.

⁶ 'There is a – let us say – a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! – it knits.... It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters. I'll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing.' Letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, 20 December 1897, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 1 1861-1897, Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies eds., (Cambridge, 1983), p. 425.

⁷ The role of the circulation of gossip in *Victory* is discussed in Robert Hampson, *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Conrad's Malaysian Fiction* (2001), pp. 147-51.

⁸ See A. J. Greimas, *Sémantique Structurale* (Paris, 1966), pp. 168-71. See also the discussion in Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), pp. 92-5.

⁹ Perhaps anything that appears to be a line must reveal itself to be circular if viewed from a sufficiently lofty vantage, as Coleridge observed. 'Doubtless, to *his* eye, which alone comprehends all Past and all Future in one eternal Present, what to our short sight appears strait is but a part of the great Cycle – just as the calm Sea to us *appears* level, tho' it be indeed only a part of a *globe*.' Letter to Joseph Cottle, 7 March 1815, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol IV 1815-1819, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, (Oxford, 1959), p. 545. A line to man is a circle to God. The Coleridge passage is discussed in relation to *Lord Jim* by J. Hillis Miller in his *Fiction and Repetition* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 23-5, and later by Con Coroneos in *Space, Conrad, and Modernity* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 32-3.

¹⁰ Page references to *Lord Jim* are to the Penguin edition, edited by Cedric Watts and Robert Hampson (Harmondsworth, 1986).

¹¹ J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*, p. 22-41.

¹² Page references to 'The End of the Tether' are to the Penguin edition of *Youth and The End of the Tether* (Harmondsworth, 1975).

¹³ For example, in 'Heart of Darkness' (1902) Kurtz goes to Africa to blaze a trail for progress but ends up building himself a stockade encircled by skulls. On the other hand his Intended, who never goes anywhere, is protected from history and its cruel lessons by an envelope of timelessness and ignorance. The captain in *The Shadow-Line* (1917) embarks on the adventure of his first command only to become becalmed as if by 'an evil spell' in the centre of a 'fatal circle' (*The Shadow-Line* (1920), pp. 141, 142).

¹⁴ Page references to 'An Outpost of Progress' are to the Penguin edition of *Tales of Unrest* (Harmondsworth, 1977).

¹⁵ Its grammatical analogue might be the sentence with which Kayerts tries to assert himself – 'I – I – will – I' – after agency has been taken out of his hands by Makola (p. 98).

¹⁶ This is a theme of W. F. Jackson Knight's anthropological investigations of the legend of the Trojan war. He argued that the walls of the city of Troy had been in fact a magic circle and that the Achaean army had sought magical as well as military ways to break in, including tricking the Trojans into demolishing part of their own wall to admit the wooden horse. Achilles' action in dragging the corpse of Hector three times round the walls of the city behind his chariot might be explained, Jackson Knight thought, as another attempt to unbind the spell. See W. F. Jackson Knight, *Vergil: Epic and Anthropology*, ed. John D. Christie (1967), pp. 211-2; see also p. 116. While circle magic certainly stretches back into prehistory, it was still evident in classical Roman times. 'How serious a jump over the line of distinction between the domains of the powers of without and within was thought to be, is fully proved by the infliction of the death penalty on any Roman soldier who entered or left a camp by any way except the gates' (p. 112). Jackson Knight argued further that the jump of Remus over the foundations of his brother Romulus' city of Rome was a deliberate magical transgression, justifying Remus' punishment by death.

¹⁷ The circumlocution can be usefully set alongside Jim's self-exculpatory jump over the normal narrative tense when he tells Marlow 'I had jumped ... it seems' (*Lord Jim*, p. 125). The two storytellers have different, almost opposite, motives for blurring the agency of these two actions.

¹⁸ '[Wang's] very leitmotif of "materializing" implies a narrative possibility inaccessible to Europeans, existence that is pure being. Like the Pilgrims in *Lord Jim*, Wang's existence seems motivated by forces and directed to goals which lie outside European consciousness.' Terry Collits, 'Imperialism, Marxism, Conrad: a political reading of *Victory*', *Textual Practice* 3 (1989), p. 315.

¹⁹ The nutcracker could well be the emblem of positivism and discovery, as well as of a traditional linear and teleological kind of narrative, attributed in 'Heart of Darkness' to sailors. 'The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut' (*Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (Harmondsworth, 1995) p. 18). But in the sceptical and decentred narratives of Marlow,

the meaning of an episode encircles the tale like a halo. E. M. Forster in his turn was obliged to discard his critical nutcrackers, when reviewing Conrad's *Notes on Life and Letters* in 1936. 'These essays do suggest that he [Conrad] is misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel...' (E. M. Forster, *Abinger Harvest* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 152).

²⁰ Peter Bagnall, in 'Joseph Conrad and Jack the Ripper', Unpublished D.Phil Thesis, University of Oxford, 1998, cited in Robert Hampson, *Cross-Cultural Encounters*, p. 225, has argued that Conrad planted clues connecting Ricardo with the Whitechapel murders of Jack the Ripper.

²¹ Of course Heyst has had an association with Wang over several years, but he consistently disregards his servant, perhaps as a result of Wang's tendency to materialise and dematerialise at will, but more likely because he is a Chinese.